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CHOOSING A GRAMMAR FOR BEGINNERS

Perhaps no more puzzling question confronts the modern language teacher of small experience than that of choosing a beginning text from among the great number and variety now available. Even if the principles that should govern such a choice have been carefully thought out, the representations of agents from the various book firms, with their formidable array of testimonials and talking-points, often lead to a result that proves far from desirable. Through undue emphasis placed upon some excellence of a minor nature, serious faults are perhaps covered up, and frequently some novelty or hobby of the author's is permitted to have far more weight than its actual teaching value would at all justify. The following paragraphs are intended to assist teachers in both colleges and secondary schools to keep a balanced judgment in comparing and passing upon the teaching merits of first-year texts. It is to be hoped that the applicability of these principles will be sufficiently general to be of help to a teacher of any modern language.

In the first place, the age of the learners, the length of the course, and the ability of the teacher must here, as in the choice of a general method, be the first consideration. A book in which the appeal is chiefly to the analytical, reasoning power of the mind is unsuited to young high-school pupils, while one with very extensive inductive apparatus is out of place in rapid college instruction. There ought to be a differentiation between the needs of a four-year high-school course and those of a two-year course, rather avoiding for the latter the fullness and broadness of presentation that is desirable for the former. Teachers of scant experience or preparation may find it advisable not to use texts of extreme types, even though these be highly recommended, until their own teaching practice has become more firmly established. With reference to any of these matters the statements of prefaces unfortunately cannot always be trusted. Authors seem reluctant to limit themselves specifically to a particular grade of work. There are notable exceptions to this, to be sure, but there is no safety except in examining the material itself, to see whether it is adapted to the particular needs under consideration. One has a right to look askance at the book whose

author claims for it equal adaptability to high school or college, direct or indirect method.¹

In the second place, one must decide whether one wishes to use an inductive or deductive plan of presentation. The first essential here is to understand the real meaning of induction. To be actually inductive the illustrative materials must *precede* the statements of theoretical grammar, and must be extensive enough to form a reasonable foundation for the development of these rules. One example is not sufficient. It is well to be on one's guard, also, against the purely deductive type of book which masquerades among its truly inductive fellows in a foreign-language costume, and by merely talking *about* grammar in a foreign tongue, often manages to deceive its author, as well as the inquiring teacher. For high-school classes a deductive type seems scarcely to be recommended; for college classes such a book frequently appears desirable, supplemented by the somewhat extensive use of additional reading material. At any rate, the teacher must be conscious of which type he wants, and must examine texts with that in view.

In the third place, especially if a book of inductive type is chosen, the nature and quantity of the illustrative reading material must receive careful attention. One must ask oneself questions like the following: Does this material combine naturalness of style or expression with an abundance of illustrations for the grammar points involved? Is it sufficient in quantity without planning to use a reader in addition, or must other reading material be provided? Is it narrative, descriptive, or dialogue, and what effect will this have upon its availability for question and answer work? (Dialogue usually proves to be quite unsuited to such

¹At this point attention may be called to the utter futility, even foolishness of asking any one to name "the best beginning text." There is no such thing, unless at the same time the conditions are specified under which the book is to be employed. Therein lies the fallacy, to my mind, of state adoptions of a single text for all high-schools, whatever other advantages such a system may have. Within a single school-system the shifting of pupils from one semester or year to the next may make it imperative to have a uniform text, but with the large number of very good books now to be had there can be little excuse for an attempt to impose any one of them upon all conditions of teachers and schools existing in a whole state. Instructors of teachers' courses, no matter how much they may desire to give definite help to their inexperienced charges, must also be on their guard against an unfair dogmatism in their recommendation of texts.

a drill exercise.) Even if, in the beginning, it deals with the universal facts and vocabulary of everyday life, does it later on introduce the desirable amount of reference either to the external features (street, country, home, business, government, etc.) or to the spiritual elements (biography, mythology, folk-lore, traditions, literature, etc.) of the life of the foreign nation? Is it suited in grade of difficulty and in content to the minds of the learners who are to use it? These questions must be answered before one is ready to judge with any degree of accuracy this section of a text, a section, moreover, which plays an extremely important role in elementary instruction if one wishes to use even a slightly reform method.

In the fourth place, and to my mind more important than any other one element, the exercises naturally suggest themselves for examination. In spite of the fact that preparing numerous supplementary exercises and communicating them to the class is a most laborious and time-consuming operation for the teacher, it is only within recent years that authors of beginning texts have thought it necessary to provide anything more than a few questions and a few English sentences for retranslation. But there is now no reason why a teacher should choose a book that does not have an abundance of suggestive exercises in connection with each lesson. One is interested to know whether these exercises are merely hints as to what can be done, or whether the material actually is given with which to work. Is there sufficient variety, not only within the lesson, but also from lesson to lesson: questions, question-forming, blank-filling, mutation exercises of all sorts, conjugation and declension by sentences, word-series for sentence-forming, word-formation, suggestions for games, retranslation exercises, etc.? Can some of the exercises be omitted without interfering with the vocabulary development? Do the exercises given suggest others if more are desired? Are directions given in English or the foreign tongue? All of these things must be carefully weighed if the teacher is desirous of sparing himself the trouble later of inventing large quantities of such material for class use.

When we come, in the fifth place, to consider the grammar statements, the first thing that must be decided is whether we want them in English or the foreign language. An otherwise excellent book would be spoiled for many conservative teachers

if the grammar rules were in the foreign tongue. This question once decided (and this is not the place to discuss its *pros* and *cons* further), we may proceed to examine the statements as to whether they are concise or not, whether they deal only with what we consider essential for our classes to have, omitting non-essentials entirely or relegating them to a synopsis in the appendix. If we are going to use the book in a long course, we need to inquire whether it has grammar in sufficient quantity and in proper arrangement for use as reference in the later years, thus avoiding the expense of a separate reference grammar. With this in view, has it a good index and list of strong or irregular verbs? Is the material within each lesson correlated, or is there too much fragmentation, leading to weakened emphasis on essentials and to loss of grammatical perspective? Is the terminology free from unjustifiable innovations? Are the topics of grammar introduced in some logical order, not causing the mind of the learner to take sudden leaps? Is sufficient use made of the knowledge of English that the pupil should already have?

In the sixth place, one must consider the size and quality of the vocabulary. An essential of a good beginning book is that it shall not have too long a vocabulary, probably about an average of 1200 words for German, somewhat more for French or Spanish. These should be usual words and should be good as a basis both for oral use of the language and the later reading of literature. Possibilities of division, as far as class drill is concerned, into active and passive vocabularies need consideration, i.e., those words that a student must be able to *use at will*, and those that he must be able merely to *recognize* when they are used by others.

In addition to these six specific features of a book, with reference to which any examination that deserves the name must be conducted, there are various other points that may prove decisive under certain conditions. Do the length and number of the lessons permit of the completion of the text within the time available? Are the special vocabularies for each lesson so arranged with reference to the other divisions of the lesson that they encourage the pupil to think, and really learn his words, or do they make it so easy for him to look up the words that he would rather do it repeatedly than learn them? If there is help given on pronunciation, is it of the old stereotyped variety occupying a few pages in the front or back of the book, or are there really helpful exer-

cises, scattered through several lessons? Are there pictures, well reproduced, interesting in content, and useful? Are printing and binding attractive? Has the book unnecessary frills, adding bulk and expense? Is there a map? What is the price?

After examining several texts with reference to these various points, it is necessary in some way to give them a relative rating. The writer has found the following score-sheet of service, not only in making his own decisions, but particularly in training a class of college seniors in the art and science of deciding on the merits of texts. It must be reiterated that the sheet is of little use until *after* the examination of several books, unless it might be for a teacher already familiar with a large number of texts, which give him a basis for comparison. Some teachers may disagree with the relative percentage values assigned to the various features, but it scarcely seems too much emphasis on the first three points to let two-thirds of the decision rest upon them. Any of the minor elements, if extremely bad, might make it undesirable to use the book even if the major features ranked very high, but no book should be chosen on account of a high rating in the minor points when the major percentage is very low. Under the "Remarks" such points could be noted as do not lend themselves readily to evaluation in the percentage columns, such as, e.g., whether the grammar statements are in English or not; whether there is an index and a list of verbs; nature of illustrations; whether the grammar is scattered throughout the book or collected in a single section; whether the presentation is inductive or deductive, etc., etc. While the results of such a scoring are not absolute, as indicated above, and while the rank-one book may not be the one a teacher will finally choose, still the use of such a device will systematize in a desirable way, I am sure, many of the haphazard efforts that are now being made to justify the choice of some certain book. It makes it easy for a teacher to see just why he does or does not want to use a text. That such graphic, concrete assistance is frequently needed, the writer's own experience, both in actual school work and in teacher training, has taught him abundantly. It is because of this experience that he has had the courage to offer this paper as a slight contribution to a difficult question which has been rather too much avoided heretofore.

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